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ABSTRACT

Initially driven by school consolidation and later augmented by the mandate to desegregate, school busing systems have grown monumentally all over the United States. Busing policy choices have been made and expanded without regard to the impact on the central enterprise of schools, which is student learning. Anecdotes from Montana, the Navajo Reservation, West Virginia, and Colorado are presented to describe long bus rides and the hardships that accompany them. Research on busing is reviewed and found to be scarce and insubstantial. Two of the most recent researchers have found that busing could be considered exploitation of children's time, and that students with large average times on buses report lower grades, poorer levels of fitness, fewer social activities, and poor study habits. Knowing more about the effects of busing might lead to better choices about closing, maintaining, or opening new schools in rural areas. Three questions are recommended for further research: what is the impact of long bus rides (over 30 minutes each way) on children's success in school? what is the effect of long bus rides on families? and what are the true costs of long bus rides for school districts? Riding the bus should not be just a 12-year task that children endure, but one that makes sense as an integral part of their successful and full education. (TD)

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LONG RIDES, TOUGH HIDES
ENDURING LONG SCHOOL BUS RIDES

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Long Rides, Tough Hides
Enduring Long School Bus Rides

Belle Zars

If Shirley K. a mother in Yaak, Montana decides to keep her children in public school next year she will load her boys into the car before 6:30 am, drive for an hour to the ranger station to meet the bus that will take her older child to Troy High School. Once on the bus, her son will get to school in about one and a half hours: school begins at 8:30. From the ranger station, Shirley will go back to Yaak and drop off her younger child at the Yaak two-room elementary school also by 8:30. In the late afternoon she and her children will repeat the journey. "This is a real hardship for families," she said. "I see kids who are exhausted."

Back before the district trimmed the route and decided not to go all the way into Yaak to pick up the high school students, Shirley rode the school bus from the turnaround at the Yaak school to the ranger station where she worked. "The kids were shot," she said. "They slept all the way."

Her options are few, and expensive. She can board her older son in town. But who to trust? "A 16 year old needs parental guidance. Kids can get into trouble in town," she says. The district will pay $8/day but that won't cover expenses. She can move into town herself. Finally she says, "I had to balance the value of Troy High School: We realized that Troy HS does not equal the value of his father."

Busing began as the carrot to the school consolidation stick. Transporting pupils was a concession to make school closure and district consolidation palatable. A century later busing became the tool to achieve the social goal of racially integrated schools. The busing system became increasingly extensive and pervasive: The rides got longer and longer.

Today in the United States 60% of all school children ride a school bus to and from school. It's a system of overwhelming magnitude. Twenty-three million children ride in 400,000 school buses that log over 21 million miles every day. The annual cost of the system is over $10 billion. Before busing for school desegregation began in earnest, and back when most urban children walked to school, buses traveled 2.2 billion miles per year. Now they travel 3.8 billion miles per year. Although the numbers are not broken out for the very different purposes of busing, a good estimate would suggest that busing in rural areas today comprises at least 75% of the total miles.

In the Chinle School district in rural Arizona on the Navajo Reservation, 73 buses travel over a million miles each year transporting 4,200 students. Not far away in Monument Valley, high school students travel on the bus for 3 hours each way; children who attend Navajo Elementary in Blanding, UT travel for 2 hours and 15 minutes to get to and from school—a total of 4.5 hours on the bus every day. Paul Platero, a researcher with the Dine Department of Education, remembers riding the bus with children who were leaning out into the aisles asleep. "We would shake the kids awake: 'Your mom is waiting outside,' and get the kids off the bus."

In the rural South, school busing came with school consolidation in the early 1900s and was slightly expanded during the late 1960s and early 1970s as part of the effort to equalize funding and desegregate schools. Prior to desegregation there were situations in the South where two buses plied the same route because it was unacceptable for whites and African Americans to ride the same bus together. In other situations because schools that served African American children were funded at levels far below those of their white counterparts it was not uncommon for a school bus to pick up white children and drive by African American children walking to an adjacent school. In one commentator's mind, busing was the "red scare issue" of the civil rights movement. (Mills, 1973) It became the rallying cry to prevent integration and a huge amount of time and energy was spent trying to prove that busing was a financial burden, bad for children, against tradition and contradictory to the values of a neighborhood/community school. The topic of debate became busing, not the value of children attending school together.

Despite the notoriety of busing around desegregation issues, the primary reason for busing children is school consolidation. Thirty-one states passed laws to consolidate schools and soon after passed laws

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allowing public money to be used to transport students. In another 14 states consolidation and pupil transportation laws passed simultaneously. Closing schools was the goal; busing students to centralized schools was the tool, and a part of the package for the communities who were losing their schools and where students could no longer reasonably walk to school. (Mills, 1973)

Tucker County, West Virginia and Routt County, Colorado are two typical cases. In Tucker County in the 1920 there were at least 12 elementary schools and 4 high schools. There was virtually no transportation of pupils at public expense. Today in Tucker County there is one high school, one K-8 school and one K-4 school. The high school and the elementary/middle school are situated in the middle of the county, far from any town or settlement. Every student in the county now rides a bus to school. The school board employs 20 bus drivers, a mechanic and a bus superintendent to operate the system. Students in the settlement of Turkey Run, in the southeastern corner of the district get on a bus at 6:30 am, change buses at Parsons, and arrive at the high school at 8:10am. The average bus ride for all students K-12 is 45 minutes. Every year there are sudden storms where school has to be dismissed early and the buses hurry to deposit children in their homes. There is no second bus or provision for students from these areas to participate in extracurriculars.

In Routt County, Colorado, the story is very similar. In the early 1900s, and in some areas surviving into the 1950s, there were elementary schools in every corner of the county—over 45 in all. Everyone walked or skied to school. Occasionally in some of the districts a parent would transport children on a horse drawn wagon or sled to school. In the 1930s some of these parents were reimbursed by the district for bringing in children from more distant ranches and homesteads. In 1920 the push for consolidation began and today there are only 3 high schools and 4 elementary schools in the 2,300 square mile county. Nearly everyone rides the bus to school unless they happen to live in one of the three towns where the remaining schools are located. Students in the Elkhead area who used to walk a mile to a K-12 school now take the bus for just under 2 hours each way for elementary and high school. Many families found the long distances to school untenable. After losing ground economically, the loss of their schools and the prospect of long bus rides was the last straw. Nearly all the families in the Elkhead area moved away after the nearby schools closed.

Whether through benign neglect or a desire to stay away from hot topics, research on busing virtually stopped in the early 1970s. The last study of dubious merit, looking at the effects of long bus rides on student achievement, is quick to give an introductory caveat: "None of the students in the sample was being bused to achieve racial balance, so the results should provide insights into the influence of busing per se without the statistically confounding effect of currently emotional issues." (Lu & Tweeten, 1973) No researcher wanted to wade into a situation where their work could be used indirectly to promote or quash school desegregation. In the late 1960s Allen Zetler at Western Montana University wrote his dissertation on school buses and their effect on student success. He studied 812 rural Montana children and found that they "accommodated very well" to long bus rides and had the same rates of success in school as their short ride peers. He did not consider family background or socioeconomic status. Nor did he have a control group of similar students who were not riding the bus. Lu and Tweeten studied 440 bused and nonbused students in rural Oklahoma. They found that the longer the bus ride the lower the composite achievement score. However, like the Zetler study, they did not consider socioeconomic status of the children and their conclusions are no more definitive than Zetler's.

In Canada and Australia two researchers have looked into the costs and consequences of long bus rides. In a novel approach, Mark Witham, an Australian economist, computes the costs of closing schools and busing children to a central location. He poses the question: What is children's time worth? If we plan for them to ride the bus for 2-3 hours every day to save the money that would have been spent on the local school, how much do we imply their time is worth? He proposes calculating the number of hours of "lost opportunity time" that children spend on the bus per year divided into the anticipated savings from school closure. He concludes that the resulting low wages "could be considered exploitation of children's time." (Witham, 1997)

Michael Fox, a Canadian geographer, tried another approach to understand the effects of busing. He asked students and members of their families how they would spend their time if bus rides were shortened. He found that "time on the bus is considered to be empty time, with few possible activities to

engage in." Students said they would sleep, engage in social and recreational activities and work if they had more time. Families reported constraints on their time as they try to meet the demanding school bus schedule. According to Fox the data indicate that "as time on the bus increases, students participate in fewer non-essential activities (those activities other than sleep, personal care, school and the bus ride)... The individuals with large average times on a bus report lower grades and poorer levels of fitness, fewer social activities and poor study habits. The universal complaint by all students is the loss of choice in activities and the overall loss of sleep-time." (Fox 1996)

Although every school administrator and transportation coordinator I spoke with expressed concern about the costs—both financial and human—of the present system, none had examined the effects of busing on children and families or had looked for correlation between school achievement, parent participation, dropout rates or attendance with the length of the bus rides.

At the state level with millions of dollars every year being spent to bus children one would suppose that someone would look into the consequences of such a massive outlay of resources. I have not yet found any state reports or documents that seriously consider the effects of busing on schools, children or families. Most of the states' efforts concentrate on costs and efficiency of buses alone. Buses and miles driven are their units of measurement. In Texas, a state with a $300 million school busing budget, there is one transportation director and his secretary to oversee the entire program. Texas does not keep track of the actual bus routes and no one documents the longest bus rides or miles driven. Like many states, the State Board of Education recommends no more than an hour ride for students, but that recommendation is widely known to be overlooked. Montana, a state with vast distances to consider, has a slightly more sophisticated system. In that state there was an effort to keep small schools with fewer than 10 students by guaranteeing them at least one teacher but that was rescinded a few years ago. Families are currently reimbursed for transporting children to school if they live over three miles from the school or bus stop. In some situations where families board their children in town, Montana provides $8/day for the first child and $5/day for each additional child to cover the costs of lodging and care. At one time Montana built and operated dormitories for students who lived a long way from school but these have since been abandoned.

Statistics on school buses tend to focus on the health of the bus rather than the health of the students who ride them. What statistics are gathered focus on tragic accidents and very narrowly discuss the issue of safety. On average 41 children die each year in school bus related accidents. About three fourths of these children are hit by the bus while they are either entering or leaving. Far more people are killed by school buses while they drive in their passenger cars. In the last 10 years, an average of 250 people per year are killed by hitting or being hit by school buses.

This focus on bus safety has led to important changes in bus design but no reduction in the number of miles ridden. Buses have been redesigned so that they don't collapse easily and students have been taught many lessons on how to avoid getting hit by a bus at the bus stop. There has been some debate over whether children should wear seat belts while riding school buses but most recently the opinion of the Transportation Department overseeing school buses is that seat belts are not an effective use of dollars and that more lives could be saved by teaching children how to behave in and around buses. School bus drivers now have to be licensed commercial drivers and many states require regular drug and alcohol testing. Unfortunately, poorer districts have not been able to purchase newer, safer buses and many districts are plagued by poorly supervised and unprofessional bus drivers. In rural Alabama, stories abound of buses breaking down and children walking or hitchhiking home. Children wait without the protection of shelters for buses that never arrive in the morning. And of course everywhere there is a plethora of stories about sex, sexual harassment, fires and violent fights on school buses. Obviously, bus drivers are not in a position to effectively supervise children while they are driving a 5-10 ton vehicle. Nor are they typically trained in classroom management strategies. In Round Top, Arizona where 85% of the district's roads are dirt and the rides are up to 80 miles each way, the superintendent reported seat covers ripped off, vandalism, harassment of younger children by older children and perennial fights. "It is a rare bus driver that can control 30 kids for 2 hours in a confined space," he said. "The long rides are harmful to kids: they are physically demanding. It's down time."

In many districts the response has been a system of punishment for infractions on the bus. Tonasket,

Washington is one example of a typical district's response to out-of-control situations on the bus. At the beginning of the year a note goes home to be signed by the parents and the child outlining the rules on the bus. On the first reported infraction the child is verbally warned and on the second a note goes home; the third and fourth incidents bring suspensions of 5 and 10 days respectively; on the next infraction the child is suspended from the bus for the remainder of the semester, or the year. One district with a similar system in Texas reported suspending 3 students from the bus for the year during the first weeks of school. All three students had no alternative transportation and, though technically they dropped out, they were effectively expelled.

Health issues have not been explored. In some ways it is ironic that the biggest feeding program in the country—the federal free and reduced breakfast and lunch program—has thoroughly documented the need for children to have healthy meals both before and during school, yet no one has investigated the effect of bus riding on children's eating habits. According to the families I spoke with, most children skip breakfast. Food and drink are not allowed on the bus. Many ride to school slightly nauseous and if breakfast is offered, turn away. One grown man reported throwing up on the bus all through his school years. A second health issue is going to the bathroom. Unlike most commercial buses, school buses don't have toilets. For students with rides over 30 minutes and through remote countryside, there is little if any opportunity to go to the bathroom. A few years ago a 35 mile bus run was abruptly interrupted on Interstate 40 when Navajo children traveling between Albuquerque and Canoncito had a "group reaction" to something eaten at school. The driver had to stop and allow the sick children to take care of themselves along the highway.

What is the effect of spending so many hours in a young life riding on a bus? Children, whose lively little bodies have been sitting in school all day, are also sitting for hours on a bus. This is not time when they can stand up, run, play or otherwise exercise. One source speculated that long rides contributed to overweight and obese students. Time on the bus is time lost. By the time they get home the playing part of the day is likely over. Students report getting on the bus in the dark and getting off the bus in the dark especially in areas with long northern winters.

Students traveling long distances on unimproved roads report asthmatic and allergy reactions from the dust and diesel fumes but these complaints have never been documented or verified. Students also complain about the lack of heating and cooling when riding buses in extreme temperatures. Children in Montana are not asked to ride the bus when temperatures drop below minus 20. Children in Texas are expected to ride the bus as normal even when temperatures are over 100. In Terlingua, Texas in the Chihuahuan desert, students rode the bus 80 miles each way to high school in Alpine from the pick-up point at the elementary school. Travel to the elementary school varied from a few minutes to over 30 minutes on dirt roads. High school attendance was rare. Students typically tried it for a year and then quit.

In Sharples, West Virginia when the state decided to close the local middle and high school and bus children over the mountain to the middle and high school in Chapmanville, students prepared for an 40 minute ride in good weather, over an hour in bad weather. They brought pillows on the bus and tried to sleep. The state immediately said that pillows were a hazard and forbade them on the bus.

Children and their parents react to these conditions in subtle and direct ways. To the irritation of school administrators parents often chose to keep their children at home rather than risk a bus ride. An example given was of a child not feeling well in the morning. If the school was nearby, the parent would probably send the child to school and know that if they got worse, or failed to get better, that the school could send the child home. A child with a long bus ride doesn't have that option. Another common coping strategy is to provide a newly licensed young person with a car to drive to school. Most rural high schools can report an enormous increase in the number of students who drive themselves, their friends and younger siblings to school. No one has calculated the miles that teens are driving when they could be riding the school bus, but this is a common concession to keep a disgruntled, tired-of-riding-the-bus student in school.

Among the avalanche of school closures in rural areas, there are a few schools that have been left open, or even built new, to prevent or alleviate the hardship of long bus rides.

In West Virginia where school closure has been the top educational priority of the state department of education and the governor for the past 10 years, Pickens K-12 School, is the only school that has won a school closure fight. The turning point in the decision was busing. State School Board members personally drove the single-lane gravel mountain road that students would take to the proposed consolidated school. They returned to Charleston and voted against the closure, admitting the road was dangerous and saying they did not want a school bus crash on their conscience.

For the last 100 years, Terlingua, Texas had a K-8 school and its high school students took the bus to Alpine over 80 miles away. Last year after a massive effort at private fundraising, Terlingua and neighboring San Vicente district built a modest five room high school. The school board and parents cite the long school bus ride as the cause of the incredibly high dropout rate of Terlingua students and the determining factor in the decision to build a high school.

Until recently, students from Navajo Mountain in southern Utah rode the bus to Blanding—a ride on mostly unimproved roads that took over 2 hours each way. In the 1970s and again in 1997, the Navajo Nation Tribal Council successfully sued the San Juan School District and forced the district to build an elementary school in the Navajo Mountain area and a high school in Monument Valley. Navajo leaders used civil rights law to protest the unequal treatment of their children who were suffering from the long rides to school.

Each of these cases is an exception and each school stands alone in defiance of the prevailing policies in their state. No one has carefully considered the effects of busing so in extreme cases like Pickens, Terlingua and Navajo Mountain the fight has been won by community people, school personnel, parents and students operating from their own common sense and direct experience.

There are three enormous questions about school busing in rural areas that rest undisturbed by research:

1)What is the impact of long bus rides (over 30 minutes each way) on children's success in school? Inside that question is a whole set of questions about whether children are tired at school when they ride a bus for a couple of hours, whether their ability to get their homework done is lessened; whether they can participate in important extracurriculars. We don't know what riding a bus for 1-6 hours a day, 180 days a year for 12 years does to a child's overall health and well being. Perhaps the effects are greater on some children than others and, if so, who is most affected? Recent research documents the importance of parents especially in young children's school success but we have no idea whether parents who live, for example, 80 miles from the elementary school are less able to participate in school activities and form a relationship with their child's teacher.

2) What is the effect of long bus rides on families? School busing has come to be seen as a necessary component of schooling in rural areas. Hence the school day extends for nearly 12 hours from some children. What are the gains and loses to family life and well-being? What contributions do the students make and fail to make to the family economy? In what ways do families share the financial burdens of long bus rides (for example by transporting students to bus terminuses and bus stops; providing vehicles for older students to drive)?

3) What are the true costs of long bus rides to school districts? Very little information is available on the actual cost of the school bus system either at the school, district or state level. Many districts float bonds to buy school buses and add to their indebtedness and possibly diminish the chances of other capitol improvements. County road departments improve and maintain roads where school buses travel. County Boards and state insurance funds absorb the costs of accidents, lawsuits and penalties. As mentioned above, parents often contribute directly to the costs of transporting students.

Conclusion

Initially driven by school consolidation and later augmented by the mandate to desegregate, school busing systems have grown monumentally all over the United States. Busing policy choices have been made and expanded without regard to the impact on the central enterprise of schools which is student

learning. Anecdotes abound and nearly everyone who has ridden a school bus has an opinion and a story to tell. But research is scarce and where it exists on school busing in this country, insubstantial. Whether a child rides a bus to school to promote desegregation, because the school that used to be nearby has closed, or simply because he or she lives in a sparsely populated area, we need to understand the true cost of that ride, to the student, the family and the school system. How far is too far? That question touches every bus riding student whatever the cause of their long ride. If we knew more about the effects of busing we might make better choices about closing, maintaining or opening new schools in rural areas. Riding the bus should not just be a 12 year task that children endure, but one that makes sense as an integral part of their successful and fullest education.

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Over 25 interviews with rural school parents, principals, district transportation directors, superintendents and state transportation directors provided the anecdotal stories in this report. These interviews were conducted between June 1997 and June 1998.

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